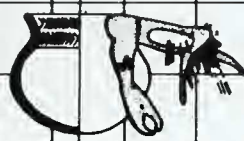
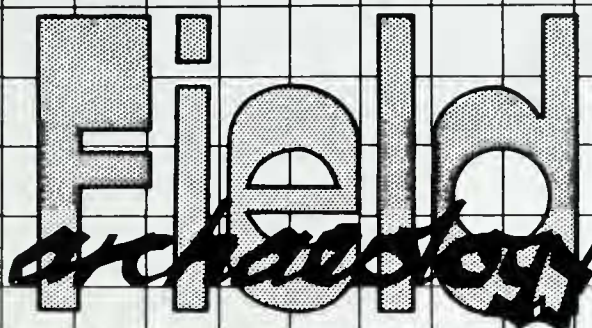


southern african



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OPINIONS

ARCHAEOLOGY AT MUSEUMS

In June this year some 17 archaeologists and other colleagues (with a training in archaeology) involved in archaeology at South African museums met in Bloemfontein to discuss mutual problems facing the profession in these institutions. There are approximately 34 full-time archaeologists and support staff employed at museums, not including vacant posts. This meeting, the first of its kind and long overdue, was organised by Zoë Henderson and her colleagues from the National Museum in Bloemfontein (NMB). It took place over two and a half days at a venue outside the city where discussions were conducted in a relaxed atmosphere. At the end of the proceedings a Museum Archaeology Working Group (MAWG) was established as the official 'voice' for museum archaeology. Many problems and issues were discussed, but only a few will be briefly addressed here.

The standard 'joke' about museums, and archaeology in particular - not enough money and posts, overworked and underpaid - has never been more 'true' than now (some of the delegates received financial assistance from the NMB to attend because of a lack of funds). However, more important is the fact that the old traditional museum environment is changing rapidly, and so is the life of the museum archaeologist. In the past museum archaeologists spent most of their time in fieldwork, on research and curation of their research material and related activities, which included preparing papers for publication. This situation has changed radically in recent years and some activities, such as research, are being replaced by public outreach programmes (museums are expected to initiate community service projects relating to HIV, crime prevention and job creation), an ever increasing administrative load, and greater demands for heritage consultancies/management.

Concerns were expressed that transformation of museums are resulting in the transformation of specialised people, such as archaeologists, into 'people who work in museums'. For example, only one museum has appointed archaeologists exclusively as researchers and they are involved full-time in archaeological research. The next best was "if I am fortunate, between a few hours a week, and sometimes only about a day a month". Some do not do any creative research/fieldwork anymore because of a "lack of time and funds" (there may be other reasons too). Whatever the reason, museum-based research appears to be 'driven to extinction' by 'new' demands from the 'new' public and social environment which have evolved during the past ten years.

To meet the demands and the challenges we need a 'new breed' of museum archaeologist to respond in an professional archaeological manner. It is important that we have an urgent meeting between the three major partners of South African Archaeology; museums, universities and SAHRA to discuss and plan for the future.

It is important for the future of archaeology that Universities train skilled graduates who can meet the specific demands made of museum archaeologists. Teaching 'world archaeology' is not preparing a graduate for a practical career in museums, or to be a heritage planner and manager such as is required with the explosion in consultancy work. Theoretical courses must make way for practical museum environment/consultancy courses to avoid or reduce the 'Frankensteins' walking archaeological surveys. Possibly we must consider dividing the discipline of archaeology into 'academic archaeology' and 'practical archaeology', with the latter being presented at a technical institution, rather than at universities.

A major problem facing museums (and South African Archaeology as a whole) is that museums struggle to fill archaeology posts. The Albany Museum, during the past six years has advertised a post three times, and has yet to receive a single application from a qualified candidate (BA. Honours degree). The National Museum in Bloemfontein has a similar problem. A few years ago the Natal Museum also faced this problem and in 1977 Aron Mazel wrote:

... there is an emerging trend in the employment pursuit pattern of archaeology graduates that we need to recognise and discuss. Archaeology graduates seem reluctant to leave the major centres of Gauteng and the Western Cape to pursue careers in these 'provinces' (Mazel 1997:87).

Mazel suggested that the information university graduates receive during their training at the 'centres', maybe at the root of the problem. He believes that students are not "adequately exposed to the research and results of 'peripheral' archaeologists and to the archaeological potential of 'peripheral' areas". Furthermore, 'peripheral

archaeologists' are never invited to the 'centres' to present their research to students and to expose them to other research areas. Mazel (1997:88) concludes by asking the question:

What, then, is the message being sent to provincial archaeologists about the value of their work? More important, what message is being sent to the students who might one day consider applying for posts in the 'peripheries'? Why apply for a job in an area you do not believe has much to offer?

These are soul searching questions for South African Archaeology and concerns in this regard was expressed and discussed at the meeting. Is this a reason why graduates do not apply for posts at museums? Why are 'peripheral archaeologists' not invited to the 'centres'? Are 'peripheral archaeologists', their research and departments regarded as 'second grade'? Whatever the reason, the museum collections are highly rated and are well-researched by graduates and university colleagues.

Another field of concern is the fact that museum archaeologists do not always have the full support of SAHRA. Several problems were discussed at the meeting, but one important problem is the lack/absence of a **National Human Remains Policy**.

Another major problem facing museum archaeologists, especially those institutions which are depositories for Phase 2 Archaeological Heritage Impact Assessments (AHIA), is storage space and related activities. Most museums are already experiencing a space shortage and they do not have the financial resources to build new storage facilities. Who will/must provide these? Further problems include the fact that the museums are/will receive vast quantities of Phase 2 material from AHIA projects in the near future. How will this operate in terms of quantity and quality, and who will decide and implement/enforce this. Or will it be a case of museums becoming 'dumping yards' for thousands of boxes of badly curated Phase 2 material and museum archaeologist spending most of their time 'slaving' to curate and manage material from private AHIA practitioners?

Unfortunately, this column has run out of time and space but there are many more issues which need to be addressed. I am only the messenger but feel free to shoot me.

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